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Tutor-Facilitated Digital Literacy Acquisition in
Hard-to-Serve Populations: A Research Project

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Corrections and Reentry: Digital Literacy Acquisition Case Study

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Corrections and Reentry Digital Literacy Acquisition Case Study



Portland State
UNIVERSITY



Program Overview

These findings are from an Institute of Museum and Library Services funded research project that interviewed more than 100 participants within a multi-state Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) Sustainable Broadband Adoption (SBA) project. The BTOP project included six lead partners who developed local networks of community organizations to provide adults with an opportunity to learn to use computers and the Internet.

While these networks created a variety of implementation strategies and ways to serve learners' needs, they shared these key features:

- *curriculum on the Learner Web, an online platform designed specifically for adult learners, which included digital literacy material in English and Spanish*
- *in-person tutor support*
- *the opportunity for learners to work at their own pace and identify their own goals*

Acknowledgements & Further Information

These research efforts were informed and supported by a National Advisory Committee and a Research Applications Committee made up of professionals who support adult learners. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms for participant protection in accordance with research protocols.

More information about the project, research findings, publications, and project data can be found in PDX Scholar at: http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/digital_literacy_acquisition/

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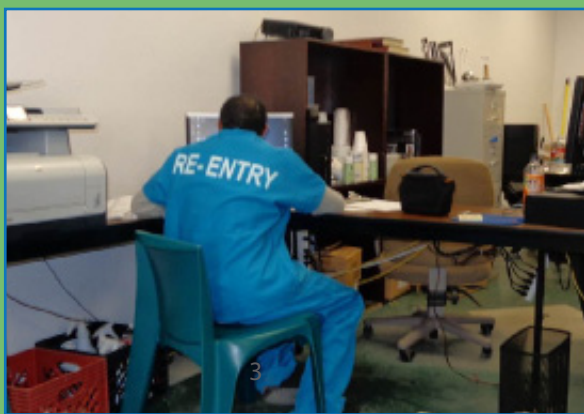


Introduction/Preface

In this case study, we examine the experiences of men participating in the digital literacy acquisition segment of the reentry process within the Orleans Parish Prison (OPP), a correctional facility in New Orleans, Louisiana. The men described in this case study were involved in a learning experience designed to prepare them for their release from prison. We put forth this case study as part of the larger conversation about the importance of reentry processes for successful transition back to civilian life. Western, Braga, Davis, and Sirois (2015) describe findings from their research on the experience of prisoner reentry:

“Prison release is a disruptive event that is often unpredictable and unfolding in a context of severe hardship. The high level of material deprivation we observed was combined with feelings of anxiety, isolation, and unease with criminally involved peers immediately after prison release. New technology, crowds, mass transit, and other aspects of everyday life were unfamiliar and only slowly became part of the respondents’ daily routines”
(p. 1540).

Some of the most essential skills for a successful transition to post-release life, such as those needed for finding a job or housing, are increasingly reliant on digital literacy skills. For example, offering digital literacy training as part of the reentry curriculum has meant that the men who go through the digital literacy program receive hands-on practice with filling out online applications, creating resumes, sending and receiving emails, and conducting effective searches online.



We acknowledge that introducing digital technology into a corrections environment is difficult because of the regulations regarding access to the Internet and prisons. However, we argue that by bringing to light the work being done within the Orleans Parish Prison (OPP) setting we are able to tell the story of how the digital literacy acquisition process-- when implemented as an integral part of the larger vision for correctional education-- can provide incarcerated individuals with a new imagined future and vision of a possible self.

However, it is also important to note that the learning and identity shifts of the participants serve to prepare them for a workforce that may be significantly different than the one they may have experienced before their period of incarceration. This is especially important given the primary concern of adult basic education and correctional education in preparing individuals for employment. This case study investigates the experiences of learners within a corrections setting and highlights the ways in which the development of self-efficacy, self-confidence, and autonomous behaviors along with shifts in identity occurred for many of these men throughout their digital literacy acquisition process.

As economists and others have noted, we are now in an economic model that “stresses adaptation to constant change through thinking and speaking for oneself, critique and empowerment, innovation and creativity, technical and systems thinking, and learning how to learn” (New London Group, 1996, p. 67).

Scholars such as Gee (2000) and Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, and Weigel (2006) suggest that engagement with digital tools allows individuals to build the skills and dispositions needed to navigate and operate within this type of economy. It may be that as incarcerated individuals learn digital literacy skills, they also acquire some soft skills that can help prepare them for a world of work in which

"[T]he old vertical chains of command are replaced by the horizontal relationships of teamwork. A division of labor into its minute, deskilled components is replaced by multi skilled, well-rounded workers who are flexible enough to be able to do complex and integrated work and traditional structures of command and control are being replaced by relationships of pedagogy: mentoring, training, and the learning organization"
(The New London Group, 1996, p. 66).

As such, we argue that the findings described in this case study should be drawn upon by policy makers when considering the funding and design of processes intended to help incarcerated individuals successfully reenter society.

Research Approach

We present experiences of the individuals moving through the OPP reentry process as a "telling case" (Mitchell, 1984) that allows us to see the features unique to digital literacy acquisition within a prison and to consider the possible implications of such a process on the participants' lives. What we describe in this study is not intended to be representative of the larger prison population nor is it meant to be generalized. The larger study (of which this research is one part) of a tutor facilitated, self-paced digital literacy acquisition program implemented in a variety of settings has demonstrated that each site was unique in the ways that program administrators and tutors responded to the needs of the learners in the program. Nonetheless, looking closely at different cases, such as the reentry process described in this piece, allows us to consider aspects of the digital literacy acquisition process we would not be able to see if we were seeking to generalize across sites and populations.

In this report, we refer to the men who participated as *learners* rather than inmates, prisoners, or offenders. This is consistent with the intent of the reentry process at OPP -- that the participants were there to learn and to move forward from their identities as incarcerated individuals. To arrive at findings and conclusions, we used a grounded theory analysis of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key-stakeholders, tutors (called mentors at OPP), and learners.

We interviewed the program director, two mentors, and two learners. One of the mentors and one of the learners had recently been released, and the other mentor and learner were approaching release.



This process provided insights into the digital literacy learning process and the role it played in the rehabilitative efforts of a reentry process within a corrections setting. The grounded theory approach allowed us to analyze the data without preconceived notions and to remain open to whatever it was the study participants were telling us. We read through the transcribed interview data multiple times and applied codes that named the experiences of the learners and mentors. We then examined the codes to develop an understanding of the relationship of these codes to one another and to arrive at our overarching finding that the experiences of the learners and mentors within the digital literacy acquisition process contributes to the emergence of new imagined futures and possible selves.

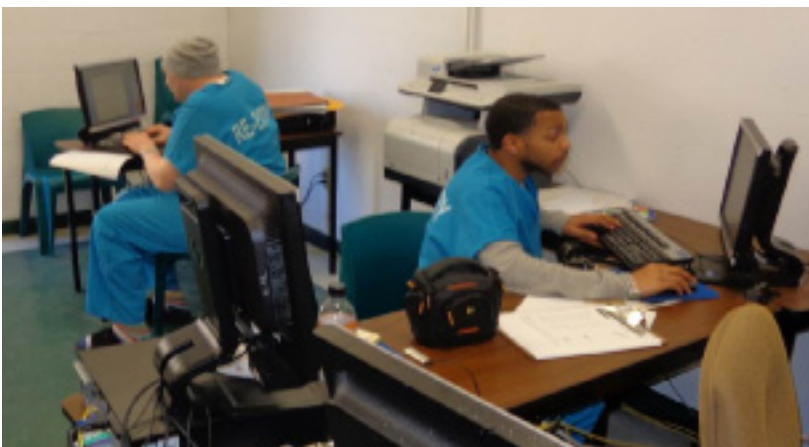
Orleans Parish Prison Reentry Process

Orleans Parish Prison, located in New Orleans, Louisiana, was a particularly rich site for research within a corrections setting as the state of Louisiana imprisons more people per capita than any other region in the world (Carson, 2015). The state also has a high rate of recidivism, with approximately half of all ex-offenders returning to prison within five years of release. Evidence suggests that recidivism is directly related to experiencing barriers such as trouble finding high quality employment and stable housing during the process of reintegrating back into one's community (Leverentz, 2011).



High recidivism rates also are occurring nationwide with many individuals finding themselves returning to prison—not because they committed a new crime but rather because they did not meet the conditions of their parole. Programs designed to support individuals as they make the transition back to civilian life, and as part of the reentry movement, facilitate the reintegration of once incarcerated individuals with a focus on community safety.

This case study examines the digital literacy acquisition process as it was implemented in a corrections setting as part of the curriculum for one such reentry process. The OPP reentry process has been operating since 2011 and offers individuals who are within 9 months of their release date an opportunity to participate in a 10-week process designed to assist them in their transition to life outside of prison. Participation is voluntary, and because of space limitations, preference is given to individuals who have been identified as being at medium or high risk for recidivism as measured by an assessment tool developed at the University of Cincinnati.



The reentry process is designed with the intent of providing participants with the necessary skills to keep themselves out of prison once they have been released. These skills are developed through coursework in anger management, character-building, job interviewing, money management, resume writing, and digital literacy.

Along with more concrete and logistical skill development, this reentry process emphasizes the importance of the personal and life-skill development of these incarcerated men. According to the director of reentry, their guiding philosophy has to do with reconnecting these men with their own humanity. This process is centered on instilling a strong sense of self worth while also fostering supportive community connections. Here, the idea is that by supporting the development and growth of a sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to do what is necessary to stay out of prison, as well as by facilitating an open line of communication with their support networks outside of prison, the men who go through the reentry process will have a better chance at successfully reintegrating into society.



This involves holding regular family nights at the prison where the men can spend time with their friends and family, eat a home-cooked meal, and listen to inspirational guest speakers. Facilitating this connection reminds the men of their community and the people who love and believe in them and who are hopeful that they will make the most of post-release life. Having a strong connection to supportive and loving friends and family members can help make the transition back to society go more smoothly (Leverentz, 2011).

As previously mentioned, many who find themselves back in prison may not have committed new crimes but rather have violated the conditions of their parole. These conditions often include attending regular appointments with their parole officers, staying sober, and not interacting with or maintaining relationships with other convicted felons. Complying with these conditions is incumbent upon the development of “soft skills” such as organization, problem solving, and interpersonal communication. These skills are necessary for successful reintegration and are strengthened within the reentry process through addiction counseling, anger management, and character building. Rather than focusing on past mistakes, this philosophy offers a strength-based approach to rehabilitation. Strength-based approaches situate individuals within the context of their lives in terms of their resources and abilities as opposed to challenges and adversities. In doing so, this approach vests power in the individual as they are treated as being capable of finding good solutions to the challenges that they face (Laursen 2000).

Digital Literacy Acquisition Program

Digital literacy training is an integral part of this reentry process, and all inmates who are going through the reentry process have 1 week, 8 hours each day, to be in the computer lab to use the structured online learning platform to learn digital literacy. The computer lab is located in a converted garage across the street from the prison.

The lab is not funded by the prison, and the Department of Corrections considers the lab to be an extracurricular activity. However, the Sheriff supports the lab. The lab is also supported by a local organization through the provision of computers.



The Daily BTOP Routine



When learners access the computer lab, they are brought over from the prison in ankle shackles, chains, and handcuffs and are escorted by two guards



While working in the computer lab, the learners are unchained and the guards remain in the room. There are 14 computer stations in the lab as well as a desk for the lab assistant facing the stations. This arrangement allows the lab assistant easy visibility of all computer screens in the lab



The lab was also humanized through small acts such as the daily ritual of being offered and poured a cup of coffee by a lab assistant

The digital literacy acquisition learning model used at this lab offered self-paced, tutor-facilitated, online support. The program was designed for adult learners and offers goal-directed and learner-driven content with links to other online and offline resources and systems as well as e-portfolios. The content is customizable and shareable across different programs and can be accessed using different roles such as for tutors or counselors.

In terms of the mentors' capability to meet individual learner needs as they arise, mentors circulate to personally check-in, guide, and encourage learners as they work. They are available to answer their questions in an individualized and flexible way, providing examples as needed.

The Learner Web is structured in such a way that learners are able to move through content at their own pace, review and practice any materials they like, as well as save their place in the materials to return to later. Most learners moving through the reentry process go through the digital literacy training over the course of one week and within that week they are able to determine how fast they move through content. Some flexibility in the schedule is allowed in that a few learners take extra time to complete the digital literacy training, and a few may not need the full week. However, the OPP learning model is somewhat unique in our research as it is not purely self-paced because access to the lab is highly restricted and structured.

At first, OPP ran the program as a cohort instructional model where all learners were guided through the program step-by-step. They then switched to the self-paced tutor facilitated model because they found that learners were entering the program with a wide array of initial digital literacy levels that were best managed through self-paced learning. The self-paced instructional model is more flexible for learners because it allows them to spend the time they have productively engaged in the content they decide is important to them. They also can review what they have learned as much as they need to before deciding to move on to new content.

The OPP reentry process served one of the largest numbers of individual learners (1150) in the larger digital literacy acquisition study. Between 700 and 900 individuals move through the reentry process each year. The majority were males ages 25-44 years old. There were usually two or three tutors (called mentors) and one lab assistant present while learners were using the computer lab. The mentor role was filled by fellow incarcerated men who were participating in a mentor program. This approach to tutoring came about in part due to the challenges encountered when trying to get civilian tutors to volunteer into a corrections setting. The mentor program was implemented as part of the reentry process and was designed as a means of breaking down the barriers between the men by fostering a sense of community and responsibility.

The saying “I am my brother’s keeper” was used frequently to describe the philosophy behind the mentor program where these men are encouraged to open themselves up to both offering and receiving services and support from one another.

The online activities of learners in this lab were highly monitored. Not only were the learners actively watched by a lab assistant and two guards, the OPP reentry director enlisted the services of technology support staff who examined each computer once a quarter to investigate whether any misconduct had occurred. The program director reported only a couple of incidents of inappropriate behavior (which were dealt with according to the law) and cited how highly the learners valued their participation in the program as the main deterrent to misconduct. According to the program director, one of the goals of the reentry process was to instill a sense of responsibility and the skill of self-discipline. The digital literacy component of the reentry process provided a valuable opportunity for working on the development of these traits as the men were given a degree of freedom when working online to build their digital literacy skills.

The Learner Experience

The learner path common to participants in the digital literacy acquisition process across settings involved experiencing three key moments:

- (a) how digital literacy is relevant to their lives
- (b) confronting and overcoming their fear of the technology, and
- (c) acquiring a stronger sense of self-confidence.

Data from the correctional setting indicated that although many learners did experience fear of technology and the development of a sense of self-confidence through their digital literacy acquisition process, they did not need to be convinced of the relevance of digital literacy in their life. These learners already understood the significance of digital literacy skills. This may be in part due to their social isolation within an incarcerated setting. Because the digital literacy training was situated as curriculum designed to prepare individuals for a successful reintegration into society, there was an inherent assumption regarding the relevance of these skills. Similarly, when considering the roles of fear and confidence in the learning experience, we found there are characteristics and implications unique to the corrections setting.

We have separated the aspects of the participants’ learning journeys to help us better understand their experiences, but it is important to remember that these elements are closely connected. In the interview excerpts, we identify the speakers by their job title or by a pseudonym to protect their anonymity.

Relevance

There was a general sense among the learners and key stakeholders that digital literacy acquisition is important for overall participation in today's society. As a key stakeholder noted,



"People who don't have access to technology won't be able to participate [in democracy], so you can't have democracy without technology now. We used to say there's no democracy without literacy, now there's no democracy without technology or only certain people will be able to be involved."

~ New Orleans BTOP Liaison

Similarly, a reentry and digital literacy mentor said that the learners took their participation in the digital literacy acquisition program seriously. He said,

"They know in today's society technology is just getting better. That's what the world surrounded right now. Without a computer it's really hard, cause that how you really just get jobs nowadays. Cause you can't go the old fashioned way and fill out a little form, you gotta do it on the computer now."

~ Tyson, Mentor



As a result of this realization, those individuals who have not yet developed skills with digital literacy see themselves as unprepared for life on the outside. A learner poignantly pointed out that,

"Without knowing how to get on and access a computer, we are pretty much lost. We of [sic] no value in a lot of jobs because a lot of jobs require you to use to be able to access computers."

~ Travis, Learner

The program participants clearly saw that learning how to use computers and the Internet would better position them for success in the outside world.

Moving from Fear to Confidence

Like the participants in other digital literacy acquisition settings, many of the learners moving through the reentry process had life histories, current identities, and present circumstances that made them fearful of computers and the Internet.

Computer anxiety is common among those new to technology (Beckers and Schmidt, 2003), and for individuals who have spent years in the correctional system, this fear may be even greater because of the separation from society experienced by incarcerated individuals.

While there were those who had high levels of digital literacy skills and who had likely regularly used digital ICTs prior to entering prison, many of these incarcerated men had low to no experience using digital information and communication technologies (ICTs). For some, their experience with technology may have come solely from television, movies, and stories shared by friends and family. Because of regulations limiting access to digital technologies in prison settings, some of the learners who had been serving long prison sentences had never encountered a computer.

However, research has indicated that, computer anxiety is an affective, changeable state and that anxiety and fears decrease as an individual gains experiences and skills using digital ICTs (Chua, Chen, & Wong, 1999).



This research supports this idea as our findings showed that a fear of computers was reduced through learning basic digital literacy skills and becoming familiar with computer technology. Within the monitored space of the computer lab, the learners were able to sit at a computer, manipulate a mouse and keyboard, and navigate the Internet all while being supported by mentors and the lab coordinator. As the participants overcame their fear and became more capable of accomplishing the tasks they set out to accomplish using the computer, they often developed a sense of self-efficacy which ultimately bolstered their sense of self-confidence.

"The phobias that I had about computers because I knew nothing about them and I felt like if I got on and people would know that I was computer illiterate, you know, I would look dumb, but I don't feel like that anymore... I used to kind of be intimidated by the computer. But now to be able to access two screens or three screens at a time, you know be able to go from one, to open up different Windows without actually shutting the computer down and starting all over again... so yeah that's, that was one of those wow moments for me."

~ Travis, Learner

Although the learners and mentors tended to focus on employment as a reason for why overcoming their fears and learning digital literacy skills was important, the program director suggested that overcoming fear of computers is more than just about computers. He suggested that going online allows these men to do things they otherwise would not be able to do, but the first step involves overcoming their fear.

This first step could be addressing how to use a mouse or how to use the computer to fill out a job application. This happens by creating a learning environment of respect and safety that allows the learners to be comfortable exploring this opportunity, which gives them the courage to explore the next opportunity. This perspective on fear was echoed by Travis who said,

"We fear the unknown, you know, we fear what we can't understand, and what we can't conquer. So I think that's one of the greatest flaws of mankind... From learning the computers to learning cultures. We don't understand it, we have a tendency to fear it... But I would say... don't be afraid man, it's nothing to be afraid of. I mean, what's to be afraid of, you're only going to learn something. I'll never be afraid of knowledge."

~ Travis, Learner

Developing Self-efficacy and Self-confidence

Although the learners often entered the program with a fear of technology, through the hands-on experiences of engaging with the online learning platform and digital literacy mentors, their fears were gradually replaced with a growing sense of self-efficacy and subsequently self-confidence.

Self-efficacy is broadly defined as the sense an individual has that they are able to affect change in their lives (Bandura, 1994).

Self-efficacy is enhanced by creating an environment in which a learner sees himself as having an effect on his environment. Thus a person's sense of self-efficacy can be shifted by creating a learning environment where the learner is able to experience success. In the case of digital literacy acquisition, self-efficacy can be understood as the belief in one's digital literacy skills (Pendell, Withers, Castek, Pizzolato, Jacobs, & Reder, 2015). Our data showed that many learners, regardless of setting, developed a sense of self-efficacy through participation in the digital literacy acquisition program. The sense of self-efficacy reduced the participants' fear of digital technology and contributed to their sense of self-confidence. Here, while the term self-efficacy is used to refer to a belief in one's digital literacy skills, self-confidence is used to refer to a general feeling of being capable (Pendell et al., 2015).

We found, however, that this aspect of learning was particularly meaningful for those going through the reentry process. Through successes experienced using the Learner Web and with the support of mentors, the learners were able to see that they are capable of learning and using computers and the Internet, which made them see themselves as competent individuals with potential.

This increasing self-confidence and belief in their own competence along with specific activities such as resume writing, allowed the learners to begin shifting their identity away from being an inmate to being someone who has a role to play within their families and within society. They began to imagine a future for themselves outside the walls of the prison.



Empowerment

The data indicated that tutor-facilitated digital literacy training also contributed to learners' empowerment processes. This empowerment, however, was built over time and with the support of the mentors.



The mentors not only assisted by answering questions about the content being learned, they also offered encouragement and patience which helped the learners feel motivated and comfortable in their learning environment.

Additionally, the self-paced, online learning platform used in this digital literacy acquisition model allowed adult learners autonomy to choose the content they wished to engage with. They were also empowered to cover the materials at their own pace within the framework of the one week they were in the computer lab.

The combination of these aspects of the learning model created a learner centered approach which supported the learners' ability to make tangible progress in their digital literacy acquisition. For individuals in the reentry process who were going through the digital literacy training as learners, being able to make real progress in their acquisition of these new skills (which were often regarded as prestigious or impressive skills to have) helped them believe in themselves as capable people who have real potential.

The program director also articulated a purpose for digital literacy acquisition that goes beyond job skills or even democratic participation. He suggested that digital literacy skills and self-empowerment would help the learners become better citizens. The program director described empowerment as being about challenging people to look at the possibilities. He said,

*"None of them know what their potential is.
Their potential has to be tapped and BTOP has allowed them to discover their potential."*

One way the program helps the learners discover their potential is by moving them past their fear of the technology and building courage. According to the program director, these things are important because empowerment leads to courage, and courage is needed to go out into a world that might be different than the world they knew. Additionally, he suggested that having this courage will get the individual through the first challenges that could lead them back to prison. For these participants, the process of empowerment comes from first seeing and believing in their own potential and second, becoming aware of the possibility for them to take a new and different path in their post-release lives.

Changing Self Identity and Imagining Possible Futures

According to Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998), when an individual experiences a shift in identity they see the world in new ways, and this shift brings about a change in how an individual acts in the world (Urrieta, 2007). Additionally, as Urrieta noted, taking on a new identity is not just about acting in a new way, it is also believing that you are who you think you are.

These ideas are particularly important when considering the corrections setting and the reentry process. The world of corrections, which contains shackles and chains, surveillance, bars and locked doors, and regimented blocks of time, creates a world in which only certain ways of being are made possible.

The reentry process and the digital literacy acquisition program brought the inmates into a different world where inmates became mentors and learners. They were treated with respect through small acts such as being offered and poured a cup of coffee. They became individuals who have resumes and write cover letters. They were able to see their “possible selves”, which are our “ideal, ought, and desired selves” (Callahan, Kaiser, Erichsen, & Miller, 2009, p. 7).



The digital literacy learning model empowered participants as it lead them toward becoming aware of the possibility for a new and different path in their lives. This was highly related to seeing their own potential; however, it went one step further. Having the positive experience of learning how to use a computer and the Internet, for many the next step was to see how these skills might actually be useful in their post-release lives.

One of the most significant ways this occurred was through the process of working on a resume and learning how to fill out online job applications. Acquiring the skills necessary to apply for a job, at times, sparked a realization that they could in fact do so and even get a job. As such, the empowerment process occurred as learners began to see themselves as people with potential who have new possibilities available to them.

Additionally, participants began to see how their newly gained knowledge of digital literacy could help them build relationships with members of their family, and especially their children. As part of this, the learning extends to their families who experience pride, hopefulness, and the belief that their loved one is on the right track. For mentors, this was especially powerful. As one mentor noted,

“I feel like if my people know, like my mom or my mother or somebody, that’ll really make her proud because I’m helping people.”

~ Tyson, Mentor

Another learner described how he would be going home to a family with two teenaged children plus two foster children. He was particularly happy to know that he would be able to show his children he could keep learning and “show off a little bit.” The program director reinforced this idea when he explained how learners would talk to their children about things like what type of mouse they were using in the computer lab; this conversation, he said, was about more than the technology-- it was about the learner and his child having something to bond over. As such, the learners could begin to see themselves as full members of their family who were loved, respected, and had something to contribute.

The Benefits of Mentoring

Those participants who were digital literacy mentors also experienced dramatic shifts in how they saw themselves. Mentors benefited from participation in the program in ways that went beyond the measurable skills of digital literacy. These individuals gained hands-on experience in a situation where they were realizing their potential. They were able to see themselves as positive contributors with valuable skills, abilities, and attributes. These skills, abilities, and attributes included learning how to work with a variety of people. Mentors also appreciated having their word trusted, which contributed to their sense of competence and growing sense of self-worth.



“The most challenging part... I don’t really like to talk that much... like stand up in front of a group of people. I’m trying to get out that stage where I can be confident in just talkin’ in front of a group of people. Because you know sometimes I get stutters, sweaty... It’s kind of hard though, cause at school I never was the one to get up and present. I use to like to be in the back, you know? So I’m still working on it to this day... And patience is another thing I have to work.. I got my patience is short, I feel like I gotta work with people.”

~Tyson, Mentor

Learning patience extended beyond working with others within the program. Reggie, another mentor expressed how learning patience would serve him after he reentered society.

“You can’t speak to everybody in the same way. It [being a mentor] gave me insight on how to deal with different people... Dealing with all these different attitudes in a short period of time.”

~ Reggie, Mentor

These soft skills, unmeasurable by metrics such as skills tests, serve to set the learners up for success in ways that go far beyond using computers. By seeing themselves as learners who were able to set and achieve goals and envision a future, they were able to build the resilience needed to succeed outside the correctional setting. They began to set goals which helped them imagine a possible future.

"I really want to get up and teach the class, but this is something I really like doing so I have to. So it's better in myself for the future. It's just something I'm gonna continue to get better at. So I gotta keep working like that... But I feel like it'll be good. I put something about computers on, like I was helping people in computers, so I'm good with computers. And that's something because I've never had a job. So that's just something to put on my little resume. That'll be nice. So I think it'll help me in a big part."

~ Tyson, Mentor

Implications

The concrete reason for correctional education and reentry the process is improving post-release employment rates and reducing recidivism (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013). As the recent Rand report noted, "the debate should no longer be about whether correctional education is effective or cost-effective; rather, the debate should focus on where the gaps in our knowledge are and opportunities to move the field forward" (Davis et al., 2013, p. 4).

We propose that the creation, implementation, and evaluation of programs such as the one described in this case study should be considered as one way to move the field forward.

The program director noted that OPP has had a 47% reduction in recidivism since implementing the reentry process; this is more than double the Department of Corrections targeted reduction of 20%. This improvement in recidivism is noteworthy, but we suggest that there are multiple factors that contribute to this improvement. We argue that what has thus far been left out of the research and policy considerations is the affective and cognitive shifts that occur as a result of strength-based correctional education and formalized reentry processes.

Desistance (Maruna, Porter & Carvalho, (2004), or the process of living a crime-free life, requires that an individual take on new ways of being in the world.

We suggest that the identity changes the learners experienced as a result of participating in the digital literacy acquisition program and the reentry process may actually contribute to changing behaviors post-release.

As the learners develop a stronger sense of self-confidence and a belief in their competence, they become empowered. Once a person experiences these internal shifts, they may begin to see themselves in a new way, which then can lead them to act more autonomously and to self-regulate. As this occurs, the learners can begin to see themselves as individuals who can attain certain achievements and hold aspirations for the future (confidence and competence), which can lead to a shift in identity. As the learners experience a change in how they see themselves, the structure of the reentry process and the digital literacy program contribute to an increase in self-regulatory and autonomous behaviors. For example, although the online activities of the participants were monitored, they were also held accountable for their online behaviors. We suggest that although the participants would be required to meet the demands of parole after release, the development of self-regulation and autonomy will support them when they have to make decisions without the constant surveillance of the correctional system.

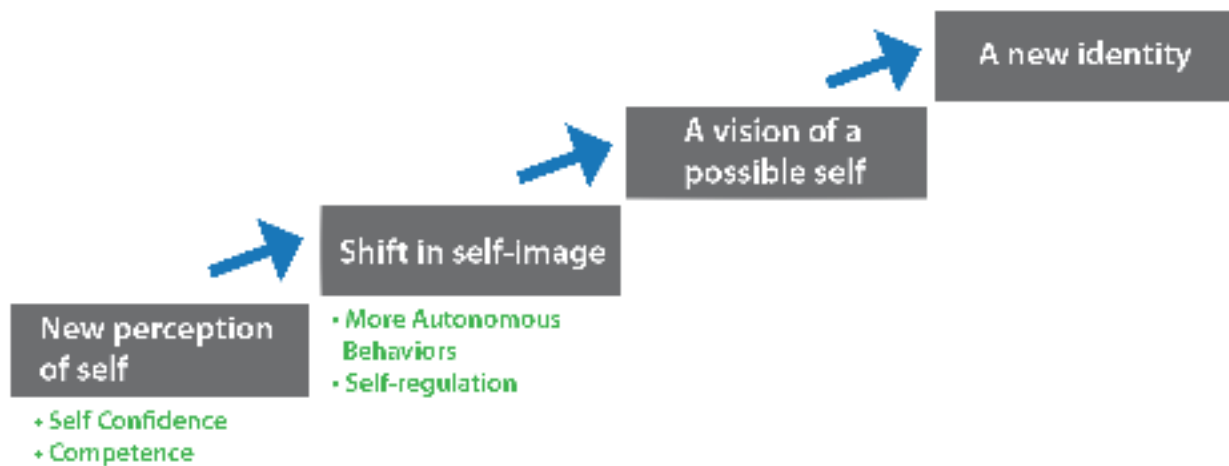


Figure: The evolution of autonomy and self empowerment

Our findings from the broader research project indicate that implementation of a digital literacy acquisition program needs to be specific to the context in which it occurs. There is no one set of best practices. Rather, there is evidence that learners move through a learning process that requires a great deal of cognitive and affective change. As such, the learning environment should take the unique needs of the learners and the learning context into consideration.

Moreover, the findings presented in this case study indicate that the effective implementation of a digital literacy acquisition program occurs within the larger context of a comprehensive reentry process. Thus, when developing digital literacy acquisition programs for under-served learners such as individuals reentering society after a period of incarceration, attention should be given to wrap-around services that support the learners holistically. Additionally, if learners are to acquire the soft skills of self-efficacy, confidence, competence, self-regulation, and autonomous behaviors, programs should be designed to allow learners growth opportunities within a safe and supportive environment. While attention should certainly be given to hard skills such as job skills and resume and cover letter writing, program administrators should remain cognizant of the affective needs of learners.

Current policy prohibits access to the Internet within a correctional setting. This policy, while intended to protect society at large may not be helpful for those individuals who are close to the end of their time served and who are preparing to reenter society.

Our findings suggest that policymakers should give consideration to allowing some access to the world of digital technology to those individuals who have demonstrated readiness to learn so that they can develop the skills and responsibility that accompanies access to the digital world.

With the widespread use of digital ICTs in all sectors of society within the United States, digital literacy plays an important role in one's ability to meet goals in their post release life. Curriculum designed to offer adults the skills needed to accomplish even basic life tasks should include support for learning how to operate a computer or smartphone or navigate the Internet and access online materials.

It is common within adult education for learners to move in and out of learning experiences because of their complicated lives.

Things happen that interfere with their ability to attend class or meet the course demands. Reder and Strawn (2001) called this “turbulence,” and the Learner Web online program was designed to acknowledge the difficulties turbulence causes for learners by allowing them to move through lessons at their own pace and by keeping track of their learning for them.

However, within the reentry setting, the learners moved through the digital literacy acquisition process quickly because of the compressed nature of the program. In many ways, the structure of prison mitigated the turbulence learners might otherwise experience as it prepared them for their transition into society and the challenges associated with life on the outside. Thus, the development of learning opportunities within the highly structured and supported context of the reentry process should be supported because, it may be for many learners, their first successful experience with educational settings. Such positive experiences may contribute to the empowerment of the learners as well as lead them to pursue additional learning opportunities.

Digital Literacy Acquisition Case Studies

- Corrections and Reentry
- Volunteers in an Adult Literacy Library Program
- Job Seeking Learners

Digital Literacy Acquisition Policy Brief

- Community Connections

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